

## Palmyra Atoll

A very short time after getting married to my first wife, I knew something was terribly wrong. The person I thought I knew seemed to be someone different. Things she previously felt unable to say because it might break us apart, now evidently, seemed fair game. As if out of the blue, she became absurdly insecure and jealous. I had seen some flashes of that early on, but I thought that getting married would alleviate those fears and give her the security she so desired. I realize it didn't help that when we first met, and for quite a while after, I was dating someone else. That's a bad way to start a relationship.

Our wedding was in early 1995, and we left on our "around the world" voyage on our 37 foot sailboat shortly after. When we came home that same winter to be with family, I was ready to leave. She conveniently took my passport with her to see her parents in New Jersey, so I secretly flew to Los Angeles to get a new passport and then intended to fly on to Tonga to pick up our boat and continue the trip without her. We had what I thought would be one last phone call while I was in the federal building waiting for my documents to be processed, and when she asked where I was, I lied and said I was with my family in Florida. New technology at the time, that I was unaware of, showed on her phone that I was in California, and after a lot of crying, pleading and promising that things would be different, I agreed to give our marriage another try. That was a mistake.

As it turns out, what she really wanted was a baby. You would think that if your prospect for marriage was a guy who had remained single until he was almost 40, and had a vasectomy, that would give you a clue that he was not interested in having children. You don't need a degree in psychology to see the level of denial in that scenario.

Two years later we had gotten as far west as Vanuatu, which is past Tonga and Fiji, and the next destination was Australia. At this point our life together was pretty miserable and neither of us was having any fun in places that should've been full of joy. She decided that it was life on the boat that was causing our problems, and that if we could just get back to land, everything would be fine. Seemingly without much choice, and with my dreams of sailing around the world dashed, I agreed, and we decided to sail to Hawaii, and back to California from there.

There's a very good reason that cruising boats leave from the American continents and sail west: that's the direction of the prevailing winds, and to sail against them, which we had to do, is inviting trouble. If I thought it was difficult sailing for 20 days and nights from Mexico to the Marquesas, I had no idea how difficult this next trip would be. For people who have any experience with sailing, they know that going down wind is relatively gentle and peaceful, but having to sail into the wind can be exhausting, particularly if you have to do it day after day.

It ended up taking us 40 very long days just to sail to Hawaii, and on the way there we came to the conclusion that it would be almost another month to sail on to California. After speaking with some other sailors on the ham radio, we realized that an option would be to hire a professional skipper to meet us in Hawaii and let him take the boat the rest of the way. That became the plan, and through a series of calls and negotiations we arranged for an experienced captain and his wife to finish the journey.

Because the trip was taking longer than we had anticipated, we also came to the conclusion that we were running out of two important things: food and fuel. Through more conversations with fellow sailors on the ham radio, we found out there was a tiny island along our path where we could stop, and that there would be a larger boat in the harbor that could sell us some diesel and supplies so that we could get to Hawaii.

The Pacific Ocean is so large that it could easily hold all of the land masses on earth. Palmyra Atoll is like a speck of dust in that vast amount of deep water. It's about 3300 miles from either New Zealand or North America, putting it pretty much in the middle of the Pacific. It's so small that it wasn't discovered until almost 1800, and even then by accident.

A passage to an inner lagoon was blasted out of the coral by the US Navy during World War II and a runway constructed so that planes could refuel to and from the South Pacific war zones. There has never been a settlement on the island and only a few boats stop there from time to time on their voyages.

In 1974, two sailboats happened to be there at the same time, one, a nice boat with a wealthy couple from San Diego, and the other, an ex-con, Buck Walker, and his girlfriend. Shortly thereafter the couple from San Diego went mysteriously missing, and Buck was later discovered living on the missing couple's boat in Hawaii. He said they had found the boat adrift with no one on it and decided to keep it. Because there were no bodies, the authorities could only charge Buck with theft.

Seven years later another couple on a cruising sailboat stopped to spend a few days on Palmyra. One day the woman was walking along the beach and discovered a partially submerged aluminum case in the sand. Inside she discovered a human skull with a bullet hole, along with many other bones. This was exactly the evidence the police were looking for and they quickly arrived to collect the evidence and send it to the FBI for testing. It turned out to be the missing woman's body and Buck was convicted of murder. Vincent Bugliosi, the trial attorney, wrote a book about this whole affair called "And the Sea Will Tell". It was also made into a TV miniseries, starring Josh Brolin and Rachel Ward.

The couple who discovered those bones, and helped solve the murder, was the couple we hired to sail our boat from Hawaii to Los Angeles. They divorced several years later, but my wife stayed in touch with them. After our ultimate divorce, my ex-wife ended up marrying that same delivery captain, and they eventually had the child she always wanted.

